

FLIPING FAILURE INTO RESILIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Has there ever been a time when, collectively, we have been called to level up our lives, push past our knowledge threshold, and face hard truths? And hasn't this triggered the buried memories of other challenging experiences – that former bully boss, that near miss with a patient, a stormy time with our teen – and forced us to face the emotions that have arisen from past failures, disappointments, and struggles?

I know it has happened to me.

You might be thinking, “Okay Sarah, but we're pretty different. You're a speaker, we're OR nurses.” You are right. But we might be more similar than you think.

When Covid-19 first came crashing into our lives here in Canada life changed overnight. For me my business came to a standstill and I know this also happened to many of your ORs. Suddenly, what we're “good at” we aren't allowed to do. In order to be able to continue to help, in a professional capacity, we were now required to work in different locations, in new ways, with new people and, most certainly, outside our comfort zones.

Added to all this was the upheaval in our personal lives. The feeling that we were letting down the people in our lives – the older adults who we could no longer visit, the kids we couldn't seem to teach grade three math to (did you know they no longer do long division?), and the friends we could not be with to help when they were struggling. It's the perfect recipe for a failure shame storm. When you're the one that everyone leans on, at work and at home, it's a pretty tough pill to swallow. Am I right?

Isolation even when you're not alone

During the bleakest of days of our Canadian winter, isolated from friends, detached from the meaning and sense of accomplishment from the work you love, and with the lack of certainty about the future, you would have been right on schedule for feeling that this was the bleakest time in your career as a nurse.

If you are anything like me, you at first deny your struggle and you just keep on keeping on. Because, after all, what choice do you have as a nurse? You are needed elsewhere in the hospital. Your family needs you. Your profession needs you.

You may also be thinking, “other people have it worse than I do.” You may tell yourself well, floor nurses are at a greater daily risk of exposure. Meanwhile those floor nurses may be doing the same by thinking that at least they make a decent wage compared to those in other professions. While those others may be thinking that they are at least lucky to have a job, and so on. None of us are allowed to actually *feel* upset. Because someone always has it worse.

But we do need to feel it. I am willing to bet you would tell me “Sarah, it is understandable that you are feeling upset.” And I would say the same back to you. Because that is the funny thing about us generous and kind folks... we give and support others while sometimes denying ourselves the same courtesy (at least at first... until we start to realize what it is costing us.)

Past failures resurface in current struggles

I can remember when I was a new mom. I always kept my struggles to myself. I went from a top performer at work to a blubbing mess in droopy sweatpants, with greasy hair, and living with constant self-doubt. *And I did it in one day.* Seriously, I went into labour half an hour after I clocked off at work.

I beat myself up from day one. I was not *allowed* to struggle with motherhood. I hold a master’s degree in family therapy and human development. I worked with families in crisis. I know the signs of depression. I told myself I should be able to fix my unrelenting unhappiness as I have all the tools. It turns out that no amount of logic, textbook knowledge, or on-the-job experience could convince my chemically imbalanced neurotransmitters that I wasn’t depressed.

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1. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
http://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance-19991312.htm
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But that is in the past, right? Why bring it up now?

Because the past has a way of sneaking in to our present. Many years after my post-partum depression (PPD) recovery that shame quietly crept up on me within the first few months of Covid. My brilliant brain made a “connection” to the last time I felt like a work failure. Just like the therapist, turned first-time mom, the motivational speaker suddenly was out of work (at least temporarily until virtual conferences became the norm). I had no one to motivate. The recognition expert did not have exposure to many people to recognize. I did not have a role in which I could help (in past major crises I had been working in a hospital where it had been easier to feel useful).

I did not put two and two together. My brain did not think, “Hey this is the same kind of crisis of confidence I had 17 years ago.” Instead I (once again) told myself I do not have the luxury of falling apart. Much like many of you might think you do not have the luxury of getting sick as, “who is going to care for others if I fall apart?” No one hires an “un-motivational speaker” and heck if people like myself cannot pull ourselves up then who is going to be there for people on the frontline like you... when you are struggling. If I could not be motivated at the first sign of struggle then did that make me a fraud? A fake? A failure?

And wasn't I a particularly huge a fraud, fake, and failure, given that, not two years earlier, I had published a book called *The Flip Side of Failing*? Yet denying our struggle does not keep the emotions from surfacing. Our experience of the world, regardless of any logical evidence that argues it should be different, still impacts us. I had to acknowledge the struggle to be able to deal with it.

We are seeing growing signs of mental health strain¹ among Canadians, and specifically, among healthcare providers.² Early research is showing

signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which is taking a toll on you as individuals as well as on the industry facing even greater global nursing shortages.³ Taken together the feelings of, “I need a day off” and “they need me, I can't take a day off” probably leaves you feeling that you *need* to deny how you feel as you don't have a choice. As the old adage goes, “why wish for something you can't have.”

Fueling the FLIP

To look at situations like this logically, and *only* logically, denies your humanity. Yes, you are desperately needed. Yes, the future is uncertain both personally and professionally. And yes, you are struggling. It is understandable. It is normal. It is human. It is to be expected.

Here is the “gift” that came from my unwanted, stubborn, unrelenting crises

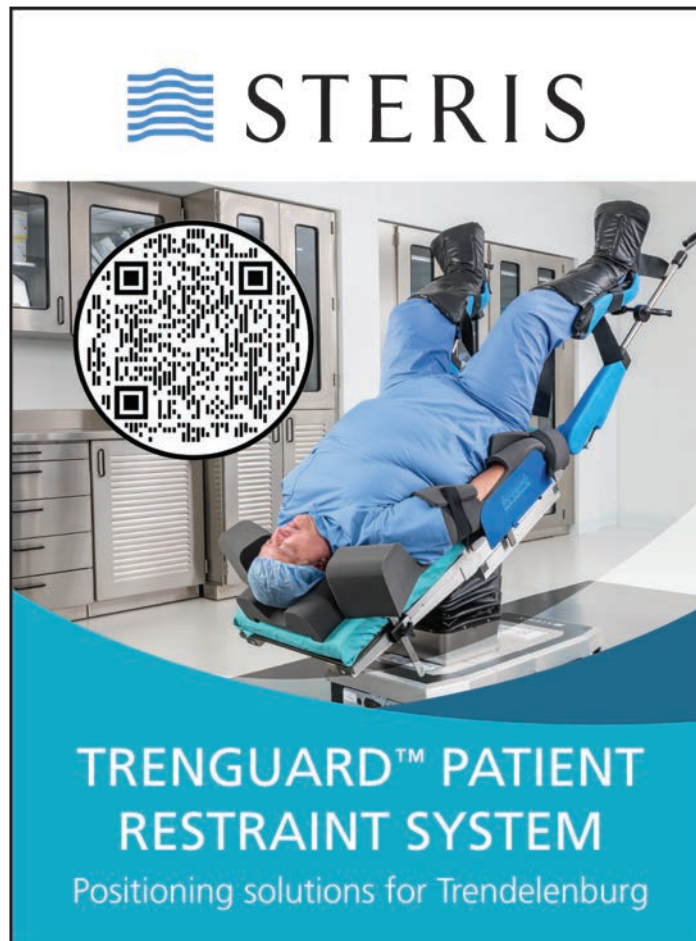
in my life, like PPD, that did not seem to want to go away. I have learned that There is no fast forward button or easy route through struggle.

Let's talk about what resilience really means.

FLIPing Failure

F – Fail

When we fail, although it may not be something we have chosen, it can help us grow, awaken, and learn something that we didn't realize we needed to learn. Honouring, noticing, and acknowledging the failure is essential for growth and meaning to arise from it. Do not let any feelings of failure that you have had during this pandemic be for nothing. Feel it, experience it, acknowledge it. Okay, now, the failure can say “my work here is done.” With that, you can move on to “L”.



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L- Learn

Fail stands for “first attempt in learning” according to A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.⁴ However, what about the second, third, sixth, twenty-sixth, or sixty-sixth attempt? That’s when we really start to stress about our abilities or think our teams are not performing or even start to feel that our businesses are failing. What if, by that fifth, sixth or maybe the 100th time, we have learned enough to propel ourselves forward to success. It is about having the grit to be able to persist *despite* resistance.

I – Ignite

When we can lean into the learning, we find a passion that creates focus, purpose, clarity, and direction that we may not have found had we been playing it safe and not risking more failure. On the other side of failure is often our greatest opportunity to meaningfully contribute to those we love, the teams we work on, and the communities we are part of.

P – Praise

The more than 30 great Canadians who I interviewed for my book, *The Flip Side of Failing*, were able to recognize their own greatness and the greatness all around them *despite their failures*. Ask yourself, when was the last time you recognized the greatness in yourself or somebody else despite the roadblock, obstacle, or challenge you ran into?

Typically, recognition is conditional, such as in a situation where someone has to go above and beyond expectations. For example, you reach the end of a project or meet that financial target, *then* you get kudos. Well, what about recognizing the accomplishments along the way? Isn’t progress just as worthy of praise as is the final outcome?

CONCLUSION

If you have to be a nurse during Covid you also get to ask for help,

acknowledge how tough this time has been, feel a crisis of confidence when you’re asked to work somewhere else or when your OR shuts down again, not know how to help your kids or sister or mother when they struggle, or simply need to go to bed earlier than you ever used to because you just cannot seem to get your energy back.

None of this means you are a failure. It means you are human. Just because you can rebuild another human from the inside out (it is pretty amazing what you can do if you sit back and think about it) does not mean you are a robot. I know you know this, but I will say it anyway - you are **allowed** to feel your current experience, acknowledge it, and not judge it.

The ironic thing is, when we lean into our failure, we can flip it that much faster. And let’s face it, this will not be our last struggle, so we might as well strengthen our failure resiliency muscles now. The whole world is stretching theirs too.

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